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AUTHOR	Thornton, Stephen J.
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ABSTRACT

Focusing on social studies, this paper asserts that taking traditional content courses by themselves may not necessarily significantly enhance teachers' subject matter competence. It suggests that preparing social studies teachers to enact curricula is more than a matter of assuring that they have enough work in the traditional academic subject. Three proposals are presented for improving teacher subject matter competence. The first proposal is facilitating a better alignment between the academic courses preservice teachers take and what they will be expected to teach. The second proposal is, in places where it is feasible, a blurring of the lines between subject matter and professional education. The third proposal is blending work done in teacher methods courses, educational foundations courses, and possibly even academic courses. (Contains 21 references.) (SM)

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What Counts as Subject Matter Knowledge for Teaching?*

Stephen J. Thornton
Teachers College, Columbia University

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The alleged inadequacies of social studies teachers' subject matter knowledge often arise as an issue. A hackneyed response is to call for "more" work in the traditional academic subjects, by which I mean geography, history, economics, and the like. In the name of subject matter competence, for instance, some states now limit the number of education courses teachers can take as part of their professional development. Although teachers have nearly always taken significantly more work in academic than professional areas (Caswell, 1951), it is often taken for granted that teachers will benefit from still more courses in the traditional academic subjects.

While I do not intend to argue against the worth of the traditional academic subjects, I contend piling up content courses by themselves may not necessarily significantly enhance teachers' subject-matter competence (Stanley, 1991; White, 1987). In particular, a deeper question is involved: What kind of content best prepares teachers to enact social studies curriculum (Cruickshank & Associates, 1996; Noddings, 1999; Sosniak, 1999)? Although subject matter and method are always intertwined in practice, for purposes of analysis here I emphasize the subject matter side of teacher education. My argument throughout is restricted to social studies.

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Teacher Preparation and the School Curriculum

Most college-level courses in the traditional academic subjects are designed primarily to serve as general education or as prerequisites for academic graduate study. They are not an ideal way to encounter a subject for purposes of teaching the K-12 curriculum. This seems to apply whether we consider the school curriculum to be the existing secondary school social studies curriculum, which is dominated by the traditional academic subjects, especially history, or well-known alternatives such as curricula based on the ideas of John Dewey, which escalate the subject matter demands of teaching.

Significantly the purposes of both types of school curriculum extend beyond the academic confines that typify college courses. For example, even curricula based on academic subjects routinely include material not beholden to any particular subject such as current events. More broadly, the announced purposes of school social studies, whether it is labeled "social studies" or "social sciences" or "history," include such goals as the promotion of democratic behaviors, endorsement of gender equity, development of informed patriotism, which diverge from the expected academic preoccupation of college courses (Thornton, 2001a; Woyshner, 2003).

For these and other reasons, the assumption that, in effect, prospective and practicing teachers arrive in instructional methods courses "knowing" the subject matters of the school social studies curriculum is open to question. Supposing the methods instructors' task is restricted to preparing his or her charges to enact a curriculum they have already mastered is an oversimplified, possibly misleading, view (Thornton, 2001a). Methods instructors face the formidable challenge of demonstrating how content from

academic subjects is merged with other material and transformed into an educative instrument, or curriculum.

A curriculum is a sequence of activities intended to provide educational experience for one or more students (Eisner, 1972). In other words, identifying a list of books does not constitute a curriculum; activity is also required (p. 153). Activity implies that the curriculum is going to engage the student in some type of action such as investigating an object from a long-ago culture or mapping a coastline or role-playing a town meeting.

Let me illustrate the notion of "activity" in a standard course on global history and geography. I recently encountered the following suggested activity (Binko & Neubert, 1996): investigate why the Allied army's decision to invade at Normandy rather than another shore during World War II was a key to the invasion's success (p. 7). We might ask, how many pre- or in-service teachers have been well prepared to integrate material from history and geography in this manner?

Staying with the topic of history and geography curriculum for the moment, I have observed relatively few social studies teachers who appear to be well prepared in both subjects. Even fewer seem to have encountered in their college courses how the two subjects complement each other (Dewey, 1966)—Dewey said they form a common topic, "the associated life of men," in which geography emphasizes the physical side and history the social (p. 211). This relationship is evident in the aforementioned topic of the Normandy invasion. A teacher who has majored in history may understand the diplomatic and military reasons why there was urgency in establishing a "second front" against Hitler's Europe. But the teacher may not have been exposed to how decision-

making was also shaped by tides, beach gradients, coastal wetlands and bluffs, the width of the English Channel at various longitudes, proximity to French ports, and so forth. The teacher may, therefore, be in a weak position to complement the historical explanation with a geographic explanation.

If we were to take an unconventional view of curriculum, one less centered on the traditional academic subjects, teachers seem even less prepared for enacting it. One approach which is uncommon in practice, although long advocated by progressive curriculum theorists, is that the social studies curriculum should be organized around social possibilities and ways of acting on them (Dewey, 1969). More specifically, this Deweyan view of social studies (Noddings, 1995) conceives curriculum as "a way of explaining human activity, enlarging social connections, or solving social problems" (p. 37).

Such an approach places great demands on teachers' knowledge of the social studies subjects and their interconnections. It also places comparable demands on their ability to draw connections with other subjects such as biology and literature as well as current events. Instructional sequences with a Deweyan slant require teachers possess lateral knowledge so that they might, for instance, draw connections among music, painting, dance, history, anthropology, literature, and so on (Noddings, 2001; Thornton, 2001b). But would a typical history major have encountered this kind of approach? More likely the history major took a scattering of courses in the history of two or three world regions with few if any linkages forged among them. Moreover, it is unlikely that attempts were made to cross academic department lines so that the history major connected those courses to anthropology or geography or literature or the visual arts.

If this same history major adopted a Deweyan view of curriculum, he or she might well lack the necessary subject matter competence to teach a sequence of lessons on a topic such as "The Coming of World War II." Would this teacher possess the lateral knowledge to incorporate Picasso's *Guernica* or Auden's poetry or Hemingway's *For Whom the Bell Tolls* or cultural beliefs related to Japanese militarism?

Thus far, I have suggested preparing social studies teachers for enacting curricula is more than a matter of assuring they have "enough" work in the traditional academic subjects. Although the topic is too large for me to more than touch on the issues raised, in the remainder of this paper I present three illustrative proposals for improving teacher subject-matter competence. Some progress toward acting on these three proposals should be possible in some places within existing institutional arrangements for teacher education.

Three Proposals for Improving Teacher Subject Matter Competence

It seems unlikely the amount of time devoted to teacher education will substantially increase; thus improving teacher subject matter knowledge will require making better use of the time available (Sosniak, 1999). This suggests my first proposal: A better alignment between the academic courses pre-service teachers take and what they will be expected to teach. This is hardly a new idea (Caswell, 1951), but despite its seeming obviousness it is often disregarded.

For a prospective secondary-school teacher majoring in European history who has one elective history course available to study Latin America, for example, a broad survey course on Latin America since Columbus would generally be more pedagogically useful

for the synthesis demands of global history curricula than a specialized seminar on the development of the 19th century Argentine beef export trade. (Of course, with some educational imagination the latter could be made pedagogically relevant if, for instance, its general significance for the growing economic links between Latin America and industrial Europe were emphasized). At any rate, unlike undergraduates preparing for graduate study in history, prospective teachers normally ought to be thinking about the usefulness of material for learning history rather than its historical significance alone.

The second proposal is, in places where it seems feasible, a blurring of the lines between subject matter and professional education. More specifically, at least some coursework in academics as well as education could serve dual purposes. Could the principles of geography and suitable activity for younger learners be taught simultaneously through curriculum materials? For instance, prospective teachers might compare and contrast an objective such as "To find out what life is like in the Sahara" for 11-year-olds to the objective "How people utilize the resources of the Sahara" for 15-year-olds (Long, 1970). What kinds of knowledge are entailed with each objective? How are these kinds alike or different? What kinds of activity are implied? How do they differ from or resemble the ways geography scholars approach the objective?

There also remains much of value for teacher education in some of the excellent materials developed in 1960s such as the High School Geography Project which has activities to explore major geographic principles (High School Geography Project & Sociological Resources for the Social Studies, 1974). In pre-service teacher education this material could be examined from both a subject view and in terms of its pedagogical demands. In in-service it could also be similarly utilized (Sparks, 1992). Curriculum

implementation efforts commonly overlook such opportunities--that is, for simultaneous growth in professional and subject matter knowledge (Eisner, 1975).

A third proposal could blend work done in teaching methods courses, educational foundations course, and possibly even academic courses. This would entail the study of significant themes over time in the school curriculum, again offering simultaneous advantages to professional and academic growth. Peace and the environment, for example, have been treated in the school curriculum of the United States and other countries for generations (Marsden, 1997, 2000). Why did these topics enter the curriculum and who introduced them? What ideological perspectives on them have been represented? What is their current curricular status?

Conclusion

I have argued in this paper that more attention is needed to the kinds of subject matter knowledge that are most applicable to teacher education. Calls for "more" subject matter knowledge are likely to be futile given the relatively finite amount of time available for teacher education. In any case, such an approach is also likely to be less than ideal as the demands of teaching a subject reshape our understanding of what it is. This is perhaps captured in the old adage that you never really know a subject until you have to teach it.

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